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CATALOGUE *of an* EXHIBITION *of*

PAINTINGS & DRAWINGS

in VARIOUS MEDIA *and*

PRODUCED *between the* YEARS 1935 and 1952

together with a Group of Photographs

of TOPOGRAPHICAL SUBJECTS

BY *JOHN PIPER*

CAMBRIDGE

The ARTS COUNCIL of GREAT BRITAIN

2 All Saints Passage

MDCCCCLIII

FOREWORD

TO have called this small collection of pictures by John Piper "retrospective" would have been presumptuous, yet within its limited scope it does record the development of his style and suggests the range of his interests over practically the whole of his artistic career. With Piper such an exhibition is perhaps of especial interest as it immediately demonstrates the way in which his manner of expression has responded at different times to the subjects and ideas which have engaged his emotional and intellectual sympathies: for, however diverse his activity, and he has practised in many media for many various occasions, his approach to his art has remained essentially the same.

Piper's career as an artist did not begin until he was twenty-five and by that time his abiding tates in "drawing, music, painting, poetry and architectural lore" were actively developed. In the artistic climate of the early 'thirties these interests were hardly those considered most desirable in a painter, but the best of Piper's early work successfully relates his interest in topography and architecture to the Braque-conditioned climate in sea-coast pictures of lighthouses, piers, the contraptions of coastguards and flat expanses of sea and sand. From such stylised subjects, easily reducible to bold shapes and broad colour, it was a switch perhaps more apparent than real when in 1933, after meeting Léger, Braque, Brancusi and Hélion, he became a convert to the abstractionist movement of which they were the chief exponents. A year of activity in which he devoted himself to "constructions" was followed in 1934 by a return to paint. The abstract pictures of this period, of which two are included in this exhibition, are exercises which depend for their effect on an exactly calculated use of colour, mass and texture : but however carefully contrived, they avoid the arid intellectualism which is the pitfall of abstract art. Piper himself has spoken of "abstract painting . . .

which in the hands of a sensitive painter . . . has a classical appearance but a romantic soul". This might well be taken as an assessment of his own abstract paintings, and if these paintings be compared with his photograph of a Pub Front in Cheltenham his own definition of romantic art as "the result of a vision that can see in things something significant beyond ordinary significance" is illustrated. It is this vision which stamps Piper's abstracts as peculiarly his own, it was this vision, too, which led him to the realisation that abstract painting was insufficient to satisfy his need for literary and poetic expression.

These important elements of his nature found outlet in excursions into the countryside armed with camera, pens, brushes, scissors and a large portfolio of coloured, patterned, marbled, printed and overprinted papers which, replacing the traditional watercolour box, nevertheless found their use in describing traditional as well as novel topographical subjects. He returned to the sea shore, sought out churches in a romantic state of Cotmanesque decay, captured the charm of Italianate Cheltenham and of Regency Brighton and extended the range of the picturesque to include Welsh Nonconformist chapels and Victorian villadom. The results of these excursions appeared in the *Architectural Review* and *Shell Guides* and embraced illustration, photography and layout; he learnt the almost dead art of aquatint and made *collage* a medium capable of rendering the most intricate varieties of texture.

From his abstract painting he had learnt restraint and a manner of looking at buildings and landscape in terms of planes which gives his oil paintings, until the early 'forties, a semi-abstract appearance – compounded of bold blocks of colour more true to one another than to what they represent – a method similarly applied in his small oil of *Dungeness* painted in 1948. In 1938 his first set-design, that for Stephen Spender's *Trial of a Judge*, again clearly reveals his debt to his abstract phase, but his designs for *The Quest* (1943), even allowing for the different nature of the works

for which they are designed, show his developed preoccupation at that time with the picturesque. Caves, follies, industrial landscapes, waterfalls, country houses, bomb-damaged Bath and the House of Commons are delineated with an increasingly dramatic touch. The whole compass of the English romantic tradition, the Picturesque, the Sublime, Vision and Imagination is attempted. His extreme technical facility is exploited to the full to record variation of texture. Colour, whose bright transparent quality had been learnt from the study of stained glass, is used with calculated effect to heighten the emotion and to record, in the artist's words, "the drama in atmosphere, in the weather and the seasons": and if his oil paintings of this time seem in general the expression of a febrile, over-dramatic activity it must be remembered that they are the products of a time in which life was lived at fever-pitch and when nerves were stretched to breaking-point. Piper was a War Artist in a sense wider than that conferred by his official title.

It was perhaps Piper's consciousness of the whole range of the English romantic tradition which, after the war, attracted him to return to a more subdued style of painting: his architectural watercolours had retained a topographical precision and more subdued colouring throughout his period of high romanticism, but between 1946 and 1948 a series of tours in Wales brought about a marked change in his style. In the pictures of this time the effort is concentrated on drawing and tonal relationship within a narrow range of sombre colour. The impression is reminiscent more of the engravings of Richard Wilson's landscapes than of the paintings of the early nineteenth-century romantics. During this period Piper has said, with some over-emphasis, that he was "learning to draw"; certainly the concentration of observation and the increased concern for structure and form resulted in works of a new grandeur, more than the brilliant records of an eye trained to the Picturesque, the products of true Vision and Imagination.

Just as his abstract period had proved a valuable discipline, so

the monochrome drawings of this period acted as a bracing which has benefited his later work. It was not likely that a colourist such as Piper would be content for long with so limited a palette and his subsequent oil paintings have shown the employment of a wider colour range than previously used. The tendency has been for the range of vision to be narrowed down ; stones instead of churches, flowers instead of landscapes, but at the same time the treatment is broader and the masses boldly handled. The increased discipline of these recent works retains the earlier brilliance but eschews the more theatrical effects : they mark a stage wholly consistent with the trend of Piper's development and they have been arrived at by the conjunction of a keen critical intelligence with a process, in Sickert's words, of "cumulative and silent observation, what the Germans call *Ablauschen*, a manner of breathless listening, as it were, with the eyes, a listening extending over a long series of years".

Of recent years Piper has designed a number of sets for both opera and ballet and from his interest in these art forms, and from ballet in particular in which grouping and movement play so large a part, have derived his paintings of frieze-like groups of figures. The same interest has attracted him to Poussin's painting and by relating that artist's timelessly suspended ballets to his own immediate experience Piper has attempted Cézanne's wish "to do Poussin all over again from Nature". These works, instinct with life and movement, are evidence of his continued development.

JOHN COMMANDER
Assistant Regional Director

CATALOGUE

I : Paintings & Drawings

1 Composition : 1935
Oil : 16 x 12

2 Composition : 1935
Oil : 16 x 12

3 Welsh chapels : 1937
Collage : 35 x 24 (framed)

4 Two set designs for *Trial of a Judge* : 1938
Watercolour : 12 x 8
COLLECTION : Sir Kenneth Clark

5 Welsh shore : 1938
Collage : 20 x 16

6 Galloways : 1938
Collage : 20 x 16

7 Strathfield Saye Church : 1941
Oil : 21 x 18
COLLECTION : Philip James, Esq.

8 Design for backcloth, *The Quest*, Scene V : 1943
Gouache : 20 x 14

9 Stained glass copy – Arlingham, Gloucs. 14th c. : 1946
Watercolour : 26 x 20

10 Dungeness : 1948
Oil : 8 x 6

11 Ivychurch, Kent : 1948
Watercolour : 21 x 16

12 Welsh mountains with lake in foreground : 1948
Watercolour : 18 x 14
COLLECTION : Sir Kenneth Clark

13 Portland : 1950
Oil : 8 x 6

14 Rocks, Capel Curig : 1950
Watercolour : 26 x 20

15 Towyn, Denbighshire : 1951
Oil : 30 x 24

16 Coalport : 1951
Watercolour : 16 x 12

17 Avington font : 1952
Chalk and gouache : 28 x 21
COLLECTION : The Arts Council

18 Rowlestone tympanum with hanging lamp : 1952
Oil : 36 x 28

19 Flowers at Kilpeck : 1952
Oil : 36 x 28

20 Ballet project : 1952
Chalk and ink : 16 x 12

21 Exercise – Poussin's *Finding of Moses* : 1952
Chalk and ink : 14 x 10

II : Photographs by John Piper

(i) Limestone wall in Anglesea

(ii) Figure – Seaton Delaval

(iii) Cwm Tryfan – Snowdonia

(iv) Portland

(v) Towyn, Denbighshire

(vi) Pub front, Cheltenham

(vii) Leafield Church, Oxon

(viii) Nave floor, Whitchurch, Bucks

The drawing reproduced on the cover is of Borrowdale and is one of the illustrations to Rupert Hart-Davis' edition of Wordsworth's *Guide to the Lakes*, with a preface by Moelwyn Merchant

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